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ABSTRACT

An instructional module designed to help prepare college-level teaching assistants (TAs) for their duties in second language instruction is presented. It consists of an overview of research on foreign language teaching, focusing on research conducted within a theoretical framework. Attention is directed to four issues: the language being taught; characteristics of the learners; the process of language acquisition; and the role of the classroom in learning. Questions for classroom discussion on language teaching and learning and suggestions for classroom activities appear throughout the overview. Contains 52 references. (MSE)

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# Research and Language Learning: A Tour of the Horizon

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one of a series of modules for the

**Professional Preparation of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages**

Grace Stovall Burkart, Editor
Center for Applied Linguistics
Washington, DC

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# Research and Language Learning: A Tour of the Horizon

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## Introduction

This module is called a tour because it is a selective summary of the research available on foreign language learning. It is selective, in part, because of the tendency of tour guides to pay more attention to some attractions than others. This guide's preference for linguistic research and, more to the point, research conducted in a theoretical framework, are examples. Inevitably, sites of historic interest have been overlooked—i.e., studies have been left out that might profitably be consulted—and readers are referred to the Suggested Additional Reading at the end for more information about them. There are three additional reasons why this tour sometimes prefers the far horizon to the beaten track—indeed, why no summary of studies relevant to foreign language learning at the university level is ever free of selectivity.

One is that many studies in language learning have been carried out among younger learners. They have been conducted, for example, among immigrant children learning English as a second[1] language. Such learners have educational priorities that are different from your students', and their ages constitute a crucial difference. Their social characteristics, their educational backgrounds, their objectives, the circumstances in which their learning takes place, and their levels of cognitive maturity are all different from those of your students, and significantly so. Studies of such learners, if they are relevant to the lives of university foreign language students at all, are probably only marginally so and should be interpreted with great care. In most such studies, so many differences intervene that drawing useful inferences is virtually precluded. Therefore, few are referred to here.

Another reason for selectivity is that even relevant studies vary importantly in their theoretical assumptions and methods—indeed, they differ in their definitions of language proficiency itself. This makes comparison risky if not impossible. Typically, a study tests a hypothesis, or proposition, about language learning to see if it holds true in the real world. Hypotheses don't fall out of the air, of course. They fall out of a cohesive view of language learning, a theory that itself derives from a close reading of the research literature. Unfortunately, different theoreticians read different literature, so they look at the same phenomena from radically different points of view and therefore come up with theories that are tangential or even incompatible. Even if they yield testable hypotheses, testing those hypotheses may require different research methods. Furthermore, theoretical claims, whatever their source, are often, though not always, re-evaluated and reformulated as new studies are published. By the time a study has been completed, the issue has often been redefined beyond recognition.

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[1] A distinction is commonly made between "foreign language" and "second language." A foreign language is one that is taught as a school subject but is not generally used for daily communication within the country. In contrast, a second language is one that may be learned as a school subject but is also widely used for communication in a country. Thus, English is a foreign language for school children studying it in France but a second language for immigrant children studying it in the United States.



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Finally, the quality of the research in this field varies considerably. Indeed, the field's infatuation with untested, and in some cases untestable, hypotheses is often remarked, as is the lack of replication.[2] In recent years hypotheses associated with some theorists have achieved the status of guiding principles in many instructional programs. In other words, they have been adopted as truthful statements about language learning without having been tested, and they have been used as the basis for programmatic decisions. This is a slippery slope. In the social sciences, propositions about truth are rarely taken lightly: they are tested rigorously, primarily with the aim of showing them to be false, and they are tested time and time again to make sure that the first results were not just a fluke. That is replication—the steady testing and retesting of a proposition to establish the likelihood that the results cannot be attributed to chance or some variable other than the one isolated for study. Unfortunately, applied linguists have not always been as scrupulous as they could be about repeating tests and getting as close as possible to an estimate of that likelihood, and they have sometimes opted for ideology over common sense.

**Question for Discussion**

Here's an idea: French majors speak English faster than engineering students.

How could you test that proposition? Once you have decided, rewrite it as a statement that includes whatever assessment measures you intend to use.

Thus, the tour that follows is selective. In its meandering selectivity, it directs your attention to four issues: the language, the learners, the process of language acquisition, and the role of the classroom. It seems reasonable to put language first. Although few people lack language, and few hesitate to define it, language is not as transparent as its ubiquity in human society and public discourse suggests. Since it is virtually impossible to distinguish the language (the linguistic bits and pieces and the rules that govern them systematically) from acquisition, the next issue is the issue of learners: who they are and how such salient differences as exist among them affect this acquisition. We then take a look at the acquisition process itself in broad outline. While we may think of language learning in association with formal, or for that matter informal, classroom behavior—the fear of constant correction, memorizing French inflections, the painful march through Caesar's Gallic Wars, the ponies and crib sheets—language acquisition actually takes place on an altogether different plane. Finally, the module includes a few suggestions for you in the classroom. It would be a mistake, however, to turn to formal research for a lot of practical advice about how to structure your course or teach it. While research can provide interesting insights, you should be chary of turning the handful of tentative and somewhat abstract conclusions it offers into recipes or prescriptions.

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[2] For a good summary of research methodology in this field, see the first chapter in McLaughlin (1987).



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**What is a foreign language?**

A foreign language is a language learned in an environment in which that language is not widely distributed or commonly used. Thus, English is a foreign language in Kyoto, and Japanese is equally foreign in Chicago. The odd thing about this definition is that it hinges not on the substance of the linguistic system itself, nor on its acquisition, but on the circumstances in which it is mastered. Furthermore, these circumstances are still more narrowly defined in university settings, though it must be said that increasingly foreign languages are studied for a variety of purposes, and more and more instruction aims at a broad competence, including proficiency in listening and speaking. The aim was different a hundred years ago.

**Question for Discussion**

Working with a partner or two, discuss the following three propositions. See if you can agree on their truth value.

Some languages have grammatical rules, some don't.
Unwritten languages are easier to learn than written languages.
Japanese is harder than Spanish.

Foreign language study invaded the Academy in the late 19th century, when it was generally agreed that no man was fully educated unless he could read French or German (in addition to one or two classical languages) well enough to gain access to important literary texts in the original. This preference for literacy development in a foreign language was of course partly a result of the prevailing view that literature was formative, partly a consequence of the university's European orientation, and partly an artifact of the instructional methods then commonly employed in the teaching of classical languages. Grammar-translation—a method relying on translation of material from the foreign language into English (and, to some extent, from English into the foreign language)—stemmed from the oral construal of ancient texts in Latin and Greek courses. It wasn't until members of the governing elite who had fallen victim to this approach discovered that they could scarcely order a meal or book a sleeping compartment in Venice or Wiesbaden that foreign language instruction began to change. That change was accelerated during World War I, which led eventually to the economic expansion and internationalization of business that we have today. As the world has shrunk, the need for functional proficiency in a foreign language has been more widely felt, informal communication has supplanted the reading of Goethe and Voltaire, less commonly taught African and Asian languages have gained academic respectability, and oral proficiency (listening and speaking) has moved into the forefront. These tendencies have had a profound effect on language policy and language teaching.



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Indeed, the audiolingual approach—an approach that favors the repetition of patterned utterances on the assumption that language learning is largely a matter of habit formation—emerged in the 20th century in part to accommodate the perceived desire for communicative competence. Its claim to build proficiency from the bottom up, its characteristic emphasis on using the language instead of merely learning about it, and the allied notion that literacy development should be deferred until oral development has expanded to support it, all flowed in part from the need to communicate.

Most recently, communicative approaches have overtaken such behaviorist practices, but that certainly does not mean that listening and speaking are now ignored. Increasingly, university courses are expected to bear the whole burden of foreign language development, from listening right through writing and beyond. Thus, foreign language instruction is today more closely aligned with general language acquisition, that is, with the development of comprehensive language proficiency such as we all have in our native languages, which brings us back to the basic question: what exactly is it that people learn when they learn a language, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in? In other words, what is language in the first place?

There are almost as many definitions of language as there are linguists, but few would disagree that language and its acquisition are closely linked. In other words, the fact that language, i.e., a native language, is acquired informally in part defines it—the fact that language is acquired unconsciously and universally by very small children in a short period of time suggests that language is different from other forms of human knowledge that are not learned in the same way. Thus, the blinkered definition of foreign language learning as a school subject—its association with the Academy, the panoply of classroom behaviors—seems reductionist when you ponder the accomplishment of children. The fact is that, within three or four years, they learn how to respond appropriately to utterances they have never heard and generate novel recombinations of words and phrases, and do so in whatever language is present in the environment. In short, they master a complex generative system,[3] and it would be inadvisable to define language without recognition of that fact.

Presumably, the only way to explain children's language acquisition is that they have an intact cognitive mechanism at birth, some mental construct, conceivably a knowledge of the rules, a language acquisition device, that enables them to take on language so efficiently. Otherwise, they would not be able to accomplish so much in so little time, and acquisition would be as protracted and incremental as their general cognitive development. Furthermore, that language acquisition device (LAD) must be universal, for it enables children to take on any language that is available in the immediate environment for them to glom onto. The LAD must contain the rules that characterize all languages, not just some subset of

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[3] The system is compounded of sounds, words, and the rules that organize them and govern their use. The formal study of these components is divided into phonetics (sounds), phonology (sound combinations, i.e., the predictable shifts in pronunciation that occur when sounds are combined), morphology (syllables and words), syntax (words in combination), and semantics (the range and limits of meaning that word combinations convey).



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languages, or the acquisitional achievement of children across the many languages they learn would be differential. This insight lies behind most of the linguistics, and by implication most of the acquisition research, that has taken place in the last forty years.

**Question for Discussion**

Don't you think that children learn language by imitating the adults around them? Haven't you noticed the children you know doing this? Give some examples.

Does this proposition account for all of their gains in language acquisition?

In short, language is to some extent defined by its acquisition, its acquirability is one of its defining properties, and that acquirability sets it apart from other types of knowledge associated with universities and other institutions. Language has a different status from calculus and chemistry and history and computers. These school subjects are not defined, in any nontrivial way, by their acquirability. It is not important to know that children do or do not master them between age X and age Y or that they do so consciously. Nor can it be said that these bodies of knowledge have a generative character comparable to that of a language, that recombinant capacity that children make so much of in such a short period of time, the rule-governed creativity that gives language its richness and its dynamism.

Indeed, while children's accomplishment in language acquisition outstrips their general cognitive development, or at least their cognitive development does not adequately explain it, achievement in chemistry and history is more closely tied to a learner's intellectual maturity: it is driven by cognition. Such achievement comes only at great cost, and while virtually all children master virtually all the generative rules of language, achievement in calculus and the like is constrained by talent, as well as cognitive maturity. In such courses, individual differences emerge more quickly and run more deeply than they do in the acquisition of native languages. Differences do emerge in foreign language courses, but that may have something to do with institutionalization—some learners are more comfortable with academic routines than others—and the distinct possibility that the LAD diminishes with age and that children and adults have different knowledge sources and different ways of learning.

In any case, children acquire second and third languages almost as easily as they acquire their first, and in language-rich environments like India, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Morocco multilingualism is the norm. It may even be the universal norm (reliable figures are hard to come by), but whether it is or not, in many countries learning a new language is as natural as breathing. Such learning also often takes place without the visual reinforcement that literacy confers. Literacy is by no means a prerequisite for language acquisition. The argument is sometimes even made that the dependence on written material that comes with literacy may actually interfere with the processing of aural input and make it harder to pick up rules. It is certainly true that there are many phenomenally good language learners in



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largely illiterate or print-impoverished environments, and of course many of the world's roughly 6500 languages have no orthographies, which definitely makes literacy development problematic.

Again, the reductionist view of language learning as an academic enterprise—replete with grades and tests and texts and semesters—misses the point. Language learning takes place far more often outside than inside institutions. It takes place whether the learner is literate or not, and sometimes even despite literacy, and it is to some extent a process that is governed biologically. The question of the extent to which it is determined biologically, or the extent to which learners can depend on the LAD as they get older, is by no means yet resolved.

What does it mean to know a language? In general, it means the development of two channels, both receptive (or interpretive) skills and productive (or expressive) skills, and there is some formal evidence, as well as plenty of informal, common sense evidence, that the former come along before the latter (Carson, et al., 1990; Harley, et al., 1990). Knowing a language, possessing linguistic knowledge, also entails three levels of mastery. The first level involves all those bits and pieces—e.g., the sounds, the inflections, etc.—that learners can't avoid memorizing, no matter how painful it is to do so. The second involves the rules for combining these elements, while the third involves managing the system, getting used to it, making it work efficiently. This distinction parallels the distinction between information about things and information about how to do things, or declarative and procedural knowledge, respectively (Anderson, 1985).

Of course, even efficient management of the system does not guarantee that you will never make a fool of yourself in a foreign language, as you and I and countless others can attest. In addition to technical mastery of these subsystems, communicative competence entails knowing how to come up with socially appropriate formulations, utterances that fit the circumstances, as well as knowing how to manage communication above the level of the sentence (Biber, 1988) and knowing how to use language to learn more language, a kind of instrumental function associated with acquisition.

**Question for Discussion**

Time for a confession. Have you ever really made a fool of yourself in a foreign language?

Tell the story to a partner. See if you can agree on what type of gaffe it was—i.e., was it syntactic? lexical? cultural?

Was it funny? Why are such gaffes almost always funny?



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All learners struggle with these types of knowledge to some extent, and to some extent succeed at mastering them. Students who see themselves as mere course-takers, however, possibly even as victims of the prevailing institutional structure of tests and grades and failure, sometimes stop at the rote level and never reach the higher, managerial levels of competence. For them, a foreign language remains a subject much like any other school subject and never becomes a means of wider, and more intimate, communication. It doesn't engage them very deeply.

On the other hand, if your department measures student progress against criteria of functional proficiency, if your students are encouraged to participate in informal learning experiences, and if they are required to use the language spontaneously to communicate their feelings and opinions, they will go further and ultimately become participants in the promiscuous acquisition of languages that goes on all the time, in the Philippines and elsewhere. While they still have to memorize paradigms, what they are really doing is turning rules into utterances, turning utterances into rules, making the language work, and learning to dominate it.

It is at least conceivable that the differences between mere course-takers and real language-learners reflect a cognitive difference. Whereas communicative learners may have residual access to the LAD (possibly only via the abstract universals instantiated in English), less communicative learners may be more dependent on general strategies that have stood them in good stead in a variety of classrooms. That distinction is only a guess, and chances are it's wrong, at least in its simplicity. LAD accessibility is programmed biochemically, not triggered attitudinally. Furthermore, few students are clearly one type or another, and your students probably cluster on the academic end of the continuum. But there is some variety in the paths students take, and their acquisition of the foreign language must have some connection to the rampant acquisition of native languages that goes on all around them. Again, the question is: to what extent is the language learning your students engage in the same as the language learning they engaged in as children?

Whether your students see language learning as natural or not will depend on how you structure your course, and of course on how free you are to structure it at all, and on how you talk to them about their language acquisition. It will also depend on the extent to which they take charge of their learning, which is only another way of saying that the shape and direction of their learning will depend on who they are. For example, if they are highly literate, as of course they are, the acquisitional experiences you provide will carry them into reading and writing. In the process, they may discover that learning to read and write a foreign language is as natural as breathing. Whatever the outcome, they will have been reminded that learning language is different from learning other things, and helping them to see that is a big step forward. There are other things teachers can do to make classroom learning seem more naturalistic. In a sense, "naturalizing" and communicating, the greening of the classroom, are what all the modules in this series are about.



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**What do we know about learners?**

We know something about age. Mature learners of language have more trouble than young ones—at least, they are at a disadvantage when measured against criteria of ultimate attainment. What "ultimate attainment" means is that if you test learners after a long period of exposure, however that is defined, children go further in their development than adults, particularly where pronunciation is concerned. On the other hand, if you test them shortly after they are first exposed to the language, older learners get further faster and make more "initial gains."

Snow and Höfnagel-Höhle (1978) looked at native English speakers of several ages learning Dutch as a second language.[4] In addition to tests of pronunciation, they administered tests that tap a variety of skills, some of them requiring a level of metalinguistic awareness uncommon among young children (e.g., a sentence evaluation or judgment task and a sentence translation task). What they found was that the adolescents (ages 12 to 15) were generally the best learners, in terms of both initial gains and ultimate attainment, but that the children had begun to move ahead in ultimate attainment on three measures, including pronunciation, by the end of the study. Thus, the adolescents, and to some extent the adults (ages 18 to 60), were the most efficient learners at the outset, while the children were coming on fast by the time the study was concluded.

Similarly, studies conducted in roughly the same fructifying period (Bailey, Madden, and Krashen, 1974; Krashen, 1977; Krashen, Butler, Birnbaum, and Robertson, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 1975) attempted to show, not that adults are necessarily faster, but that they follow a similar path, or "natural order," in second language acquisition. If they do, it would be interesting because the two processes, first and second or foreign language acquisition, might then have something in common. They might both be entirely natural processes motivated in some fashion by the mind of the learner.

One study (Bailey, Madden, and Krashen, 1974), for example, showed that a variety of adult learners enrolled in English as a second language classes at the City University in New York followed virtually the same order of acquisition of grammatical material as a variety of children in comparable classes, suggesting a similarity in their acquisitional experiences across age groups and across first languages. The finding has been widely cited to support a convergence between older and younger learners and an indirect relationship between first and second language acquisition (although this second language acquisition order was different from the order found among children acquiring English as a native language). The claim is suspect because of methodological and interpretational problems, but it raises the prospect that the innate cognitive mechanism is still operative at a relatively

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[4] Researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) study learners across various linguistic boundaries and indeed, rarely look at university learners of foreign languages in the United States. Although it was conducted in a second (as opposed to foreign) language context, you may find this particular study more relevant than others because many subjects were older learners and some measures the researchers used to establish proficiency were similar to tests employed in university foreign language courses.



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advanced age. Studies corroborating natural orders among foreign language learners (Fathman, 1978) have strengthened the credibility of the claim, as has more recent research on developmental sequences and stages (Pienemann, Johnston, and Brindley, 1988).

However, recent studies conducted with reference to language universals have either suggested the opposite or provided at best tentative support for the possibility of convergence of older and younger language learners (Gass and Schachter, 1989; Hilles, 1986; White, 1985). Universals are abstract rule structures alleged by Chomsky (1981) and others to operate across large numbers of languages. The concept is interesting because it specifies the type of knowledge children are likely to possess at birth to make their manifestly rapid gains in language acquisition. Research employing this concept looks at the readiness with which foreign language learners embrace the universal rules associated with whatever foreign language they are learning, on the assumption that if they do so with alacrity then the LAD is still accessible (Chaudron, 1983; White, 1989). The evidence is mixed. Some studies (Flynn and O'Neill, 1988; White, 1985) support the mechanism's persistent accessibility, while others (Sheppard, 1992; White, 1989) have uncovered a tendency for learners to impose non-universal rules from their native languages on the foreign language. Little if any of this is likely to have an immediate effect on the design of foreign language instruction at the university level; however, it is a promising direction for research, and it will be influential in the future.

**Question for Discussion**

Imagine that you are the only humanoid on a planet inhabited by creatures called Parthenogenes that issue full blown from the head of their leader, called Parth. They are intelligent, and intelligible, but they don't understand the distinctly mundane notion of childhood.

One day, as you are trying to explain the cognitive differences between human children and adults, you point out that there are some things children don't understand but adults do. They ask you for examples. See if you can come up with five or six. By the way, they have no concept whatever of growth or maturity.

Increasingly, children and adults look like different learners with slightly different capabilities and advantages. Adults hit the ground running, while children, with more time on their hands, stay the course and go further. Children and adults are also good learners of different aspects of language, with children often showing an aptitude for pronunciation and adults for aspects associated with schooling and literacy. Thus, adults have an advantage over children in the types of learning adults are required to undertake. Whether they are similar learners or not, however, your students, your mature learners, are certainly experienced and accomplished. In other words, they are highly literate, and they are sensitive to language at a gross or metalinguistic level whether they know it or not. They are also fully developed cognitively. These abilities predispose them to learn in two significant ways.



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In the first place, reading will come more easily because, at least theoretically, they are set up via literacy in their native language for rapid initial gains in foreign language reading (Carrell, 1991; Cummins, 1991; Hulstijn, 1991). They have developed the ability to extract what they need from unfamiliar texts in an efficient manner, and such skills are generic and transferable. Since they have this advantage, even your basic students can undertake leisure reading or the reading of technical material for which they possess the necessary background knowledge. Such reading contributes synergistically to their overall language development. That does not mean that it will be problem free and unimpeded. Literacy doesn't emerge suddenly and miraculously like musical talent ("Without a single lesson, Freddie sat down at the Pleyel and dashed off the F Major Nocturne!"). Rather, it requires application and hard work; but your students can sort out relatively complex material because they have some background knowledge to draw on and strategies for securing what they need from a text. There are also ways to ease their transition into foreign language reading.[5]

Secondly, your students are comparatively good at systems, analysis, games, rules, puzzles, problems, tasks. These skills, allied with their subconscious knowledge of the rules of their native language and a little active "consciousness raising" (Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith, 1988), can enhance initial gains. That means that in figuring out rules and learning how to move the pieces around (the second level of language mastery, described above), they have advantages. As you build their awareness of these rules, encourage experimentation with the language, and referee their performance, they may come to see a language as more of a puzzle than a constant source of drudgery. That does not mean that they will automatically learn to manage the system better (level three of language mastery). These advantages won't make it easier to process aural input or memorize verb endings or start a conversation. All by themselves, they will not sustain the whole burden of foreign language acquisition, and they won't make it fun. But they can make it stimulating—as can exposure to foreign cultures, watching videos, communicating purposefully in a new language, and the like.

Putting the process in a different perspective, your students have devised learning strategies that prove effective in a variety of learning experiences. Learning strategies are coping mechanisms learners develop, consciously or unconsciously, to regulate and manage input and the absorption of new material. Recently, they have been given considerable attention.[6] O'Malley and Chamot (1990), for example, have identified such effective strategies as seeking clarification, verifying assumptions, analyzing, monitoring output, and guessing. Additionally, Bialystok (1990) and others have identified what they call

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[5] Learning to write in a foreign language is even more problematic than learning to read, as Silva (1993) and others have pointed out, since writers have fewer resources at their command in the foreign language than in their native language.

[6] One reason is that there is a widely, though by no means universally, held view that one cause of child-adult differences is that language functions are differentially distributed in the brains of children and adults. While children assimilate language in unanalyzed chunks, and of course depend on that miraculous cognitive mechanism (the LAD) to sustain them, adults take a more analytical approach and fall back on strategies that have proved effective in many learning contexts.



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"communication strategies" that help learners form utterances and participate in conversation. Bialystok's include the paraphrasing of a partner's utterance, talking around the point, abandoning a topic altogether ("avoidance"), translation—all of which at least maintain the discourse, though they may also hijack it and carry it off in a new direction. They are also similar to the "strategic competence" that forms part of general communicative competence (see above). Krashen would say that such learners are seeking input they can use for acquisition, what he calls "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1992).

Oxford and Cohen (1992) have suggested that the cognitive status of many of these strategies (Are they conscious? Are they learnable?) and their role in language learning are still murky. The problem is that the information adduced in their support comes from retrospective reports, called "think-aloud protocols," of successful language learners. Without an independent assessment of these reports, and absent reports from unsuccessful learners for comparison, it is difficult to know if the reported strategies actually motivate success or themselves have an underlying motive—something like an ability to perform think-aloud protocols, for example. Even if we understood their status better, we still might not know if they are teachable.

**Suggestion for Action**

Make a list of a dozen color terms in a foreign language.

For each word, recorded in the Latin alphabet, provide a pronunciation guide and a one-word translation.

Give your list to a small group of native English speakers who don't know the foreign language and ask them to memorize the words in ten minutes. Don't give them any other information.

When ten minutes are up, ask them to discuss the strategies they used to accomplish the task.

In general, the most successful learners seem to have the largest strategy repertoires, and they are good at choosing the most effective strategies for whatever circumstances they are in (Rubin, 1975). Awareness of the process as a whole also seems to be associated with success (Wenden, 1987), though generic, metacognitive strategies involving executive control and the like appear to be less influential than task-specific, cognitive strategies such as those involving internal modeling and language processing. At least one study reports that cognitive strategies such as repetition and note-taking are more frequently relied on than metacognitive strategies such as planning (Chamot, O'Malley, Küpper, and Impink-Hernandez, 1987), and interesting differences in strategy selection along dimensions of gender, age, and task type have also been reported. On the whole, however, consensus as to the nature and distribution of these strategies has not been achieved. Without exploring the



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conceptual issues too deeply, many practitioners simply assume that strategies exist, that they are influential, and that effective strategies can be taught to less effective learners. Others have their doubts.

In short, your students have the advantage of knowing at least one other language well. Indeed, much of their experience has been mediated by that language, and their habitual dependence on it might make them less willing to take risks in the new language. The metalinguistic awareness they have developed by virtue of first language literacy may confer an advantage. That is, they have powerful intuitions about many aspects of language in general and the games people play with it. They understand the systematicity of language, they are good at inductive reasoning, they are comfortable with the level of abstraction characteristic of many linguistic rules, etc. They are also experienced general learners and masters of the classroom. They know how to organize language input, or indeed any kind of input, for efficient acquisition. Thus, their background knowledge both complicates and facilitates the process of language learning. It can complicate it by giving the native language too big a role or reducing language to an academic routine. It can facilitate it by enabling the learner to grasp the shape of the new language in broad outline quickly and set priorities. Your job is to understand how to discourage overreliance on this knowledge while enlisting its support in behalf of foreign language development.

Since it is likely that your most active and successful students depend on strategies to dominate the material while learning it, it won't come as a surprise to learn that IQ tests—which correlate highly with success in school but are otherwise poorly defined—are often good predictors of achievement in foreign language classes, especially in school-related aspects like reading and grammar. Although it is theoretically possible to identify such potential predictors, and to group students accordingly, differences among learners so grouped will inevitably surface within a matter of weeks. Diversity would emerge even if assessment instruments and the protocols for categorizing students were more finely tuned than they now are, and if we knew a lot more about what makes a good language learner. Indeed, the tendency of learners to differ in a bewildering variety of ways and their volatility as achievers are hallmarks of the language learning process, and readers are encouraged to explore the variety of personality, attitudinal, and social variables that have been used to distinguish them. A good place to start is Brown (1987). Fascinating as the topic is, however, many variables that have been studied—and everything from gender to extroversion has been studied—are unlikely to have an immediate effect on your classes. Even if they do, it is unlikely that you have the power to control or manipulate them.

**What does the process of language learning look like?**

Despite the research in all of these domains, and the certainty with which findings are sometimes reported, the process of foreign language acquisition itself is largely uncharted.[7] While language learners have various aptitudes, they all have to cross unfamiliar terrain

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[7] Take a look at Pinker's (1994) chapter called "Language Organs and Grammar Genes" to get a good idea of just how *incognita* the *terra* really is.



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without maps or compasses. In other words, they have to negotiate a sequence of "approximative" grammars called interlanguages (ILs), each of which represents a level of understanding of, or a cluster of hypotheses about, the target language. Here is what that sequence, that wilderness or interlanguage,[8] looks like, insofar as we can tell. Since we can't tell very much, the description is largely metaphorical.

*Uniqueness*

At the outset of the process, there is a lot of variety among language learners, and (theoretically at least) ILs vary significantly from learner to learner. As Gass and Selinker have reported (1994: 40), ILs are "unique creations [since] each individual creates his or her own language system." As learners move gradually toward competence in the foreign language, they impose rules on the welter of foreign language material to which they are exposed. They all do it differently, though the native language plays a role, and therefore learners who share a native language will construct rules out of the same raw material. The variability of ILs is to some extent traceable to "the effect of situation, linguistic context, degree of planning, or some other identifiable cause" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

As with any attempt to capture a process that cannot be directly observed, however, the extent to which these ILs vary is anybody's guess. Another problem is that the IL is a moving target, growing and changing as the learner's competence increases. Another is that we would have no way of measuring the variety even if we had harder data, because we have no way of manipulating the data, and never will so long as humane considerations prevail and linguists are kept (as of course they should be) from manipulating students in any but the most superficial ways. In other words, it is impossible to know how common a particular occurrence is if we don't know what the range and distribution of possible occurrences are.

Despite these problems, we do know that ILs vary somewhat, though we may not know if they really are the highly personalized, "idiosyncratic dialects"[9] that Corder (1971: 151) envisioned. Nor would a more precise measure of their idiosyncrasy necessarily be of much help in planning and teaching a foreign language course.

*Systematicity*

Interlanguages also vary systematically over time, according to those who have looked at the data on learner errors (Brown, 1987). At the earliest stage, such errors are often random and unsystematic, but once the shape of the new system begins to emerge, they take on systematicity. This simply means, for example, that once students learn the inflections for a single class of verbs, they may apply them to all classes indiscriminately. They will still make errors, therefore, but their errors are predicated on systematic assumptions, or rules, about the language. Many of these putative rules stem from the foreign language, some fall

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[8] The term "interlanguage" is used for each "approximative system" (Nemser, 1971) as well as for the sequence of such systems as a whole.

[9] A dialect is one version of a language, not by any means a "substandard" variety. Thus, the standard variety—the one typically associated with formal discourses such as lectures and news programs—is simply one dialect among many.



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out of the native language, some are unique. Whatever their source, students in this phase pay little attention to errors, which makes error correction on your part a largely thankless exercise.

Their learning also has an irregular ebb and flow: forward spurts, followed by confusion and a temporary decrement ("backsliding"), followed by consolidation and equilibrium. Once equilibrium is achieved, learners' errors become more consistent, and students are perceptibly more receptive to correction. For that reason, many methodologists, particularly those concerned with "comprehensible output" (Swain, 1985), see a role for error correction once a learner's awareness of errors deepens and enlarges. This is the phase at which Curran and others associated with Counseling-Learning approach to language teaching (Brown, 1987) suggest that an interesting role-reversal takes place: learners begin to take charge of their learning, relegating the teacher to the subsidiary role of adviser. Advice about errors is one type of advice they then demand of them.

In any case, variability isn't chaotic. Learners vary within limits, and it is the general pattern of variability that many foreign language teachers find interesting, and in many ways frustrating.

*Fossilization*

Some rules are more resistent to change and improvement than others and get more firmly imprinted on the IL. Fossilization results when these illegitimate rules become permanent. This explains, at least metaphorically, the tendency of some learners to stop progressing and remain at a plateau. It is more common among older students than children, no doubt for a variety of psychosocial as well as cognitive reasons.

For example, some learners—who have another language to fall back on, after all—learn as much of the foreign language as they need for their purposes. Students stop learning once they reach a minimal objective, whether that objective is short term and academic (e.g., passing a test) or long term and communicative (e.g., spending a semester abroad). A lot of the unruliness they exhibit in the meantime will sort itself out eventually, if they stay the course. There is little point in trying to correct all their errors in the hope of extirpating the deviant rules they have adopted. Correction won't have an effect before learners are ready. In this small window of opportunity, in the final phase of the IL passage, learners are receptive to, indeed demand, error correction, but there are realistic limits to the amount they can absorb, given their tendency to remain at their plateau.

*Convergence*

As learners' rules approximate those of the foreign language, by definition learners shed dependence on their native languages. Once foreign language norms predominate, convergence sets in. This means that learners who come from different native language backgrounds will make similar assumptions, formulate similar hypotheses, about the rules of the foreign language and make similar errors. These sets of assumptions may not resemble the rules of the target language very closely, but they do resemble each other. Variability is



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washing out and universal preferences are bobbing to the surface. If the process continues and the learner persists, that process is eventually overtaken by success; in other words, the learner's knowledge of the rules of the foreign language is virtually complete and comprehensive. There will always be an element of dependence on an IL or the native language, even among the most proficient speakers, particularly where production is concerned. Some subsystems may remain inchoate or fossilized, and some skills may be stronger than others, but the learner's knowledge of the language is as extensive as it is going to get.

**Question for Discussion**

Speakers of foreign languages often claim that they feel schizophrenic: they have a different personality in each language. Indeed, second language acquisition is sometimes described as a birthing process.

Is this an apt metaphor? Do you ever feel like a different person when speaking a foreign language? Discuss with a partner.

What are the implications of this depiction of the language learning process for your students? One is that they will make lots of errors, though many errors will automatically fall away as the process moves forward. Once students know the rudiments of the code, you should encourage them to correct their own and even each other's errors. Whether they attend to errors or not, however, you should avoid intervening every time a mistake occurs on the assumption that, unless you head it off, an error will infect the student's grammar like a virus. As students try to communicate in the foreign language, two cognitive channels are open. They are aware of the rules to some extent, at some level of consciousness, and they possess the communicative competence needed to send and receive messages in actual situations. Occasionally, as they get used to processing, as they focus on the message rather than its form, wires get crossed and mistakes occur. These are mistakes in performance, and they do not indicate a lack of awareness of the rules. Nor does the existence of such mistakes suggest that correcting them will have a remedial or prophylactic effect. Sometimes simply drawing students' attention to the problem and inviting repair is enough to get it fixed (see below).

Some of your students will plateau. That is, they will learn only as much as they have to to survive the course, and that level of accomplishment will fall short of the communicative competence they are capable of. This lack of achievement may not be cognitively motivated. While the process by which a language grows can take a long time and, in a sense, never reach fruition, learning a foreign language in the classroom comes equipped with tests and time limits and, sometimes, unrealistic expectations. Therefore, students' lack of accomplishment can often be traced to the unnatural circumstances in which their learning takes place.



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**What can the classroom contribute?**

As hedged about with limitations and tests as courses are, as unnatural as the university setting is, it is still possible to align the classroom with the real world. Here are ten course characteristics that many progressive language teachers would endorse. While few stem directly from the research, eight are consistent with the notion that foreign languages are social phenomena and two reflect the differences between children and adults as learners, in other words, the shift in learning strategies those differences trigger.

*Input*

Although there is little evidence that input alone determines acquisition, input is obviously necessary. Given the usual time limits, courses that stress grammar rules and drill, or for that matter, communicative speaking practice, are unlikely to be successful unless they include both focused and extensive listening. Focused listening requires learners to listen for specific information, possibly even grammatical information like inflectional affixes. Extensive listening requires them to grasp a few key details or the main idea. Focused listening asks them to pay attention to discrete features and ignore meaning. Extensive listening asks them to adopt a top-down strategy to distinguish elements of meaning. In both cases, students should be prepared for the activity by being assigned beforehand a clear task to perform while they are listening and a form, a grid, a set of true/false statements, whatever, to go along with and support the task. For example, you can create listening exercises by taking a cartoon sequence, from which the words have been eliminated, and telling the story in the foreign language. The pictures reinforce the students' understanding of the aural input.

*Authenticity*

Always try to use the language as naturally as possible when you are talking to students. Although slowing down may seem to make the message more comprehensible, that is not always the case, because when you slow down you also distort the subtle shifts in pronunciation that normally occur in naturally paced speech. These shifts (some sounds are systematically elided with neighboring sounds, for example) are governed by rules called phonological rules, and learning them, at some level of consciousness, is part of what language students have to do. You may have to simplify your language by using a lexicon that is within the reach of the students and sticking to syntax they can understand or safely ignore, but you should avoid distorting the phonology or altering the stress patterns or speaking too loud. Simply saying the same thing in a variety of ways—paraphrasing—is often a better technique than doctoring the input.

As soon as possible, students should hear and see authentic samples of the language. Radio broadcasts, videos, magazine articles, etc. can be used effectively if the language is not too complex and the context is clear.



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**Suggestion for Action**

Where can you find authentic aural samples (not commercial tapes) of the language you teach that are not too difficult for intermediate students?

What about written samples?

List five criteria you would apply in selecting such samples. How would you use the samples in class?

*Context*

Whenever possible, introduce a language sample in context; that is, give the students contextual clues to help them understand it. These include titles, illustrations, subheadings, outlines, review questions (that the students read before they confront the text), timelines, and semantic webs. Topicality is also a consideration. It aids understanding if the students are already familiar with the topic. In their interaction with the text, the students will depend as much on context as on language, but the distinction between linguistic and extralinguistic clues is not absolute. Extralinguistic clues enable students to reorganize their previously acquired background information to include new cultural information or create new frames of reference. For example, if your students of Italian conceptualize food with reference to the culture of Michigan's Upper Peninsula or the Great Plains, they may have to expand their frame of reference to include gnocchi, tiramisu, and pickled eel. More to the point, contextualization draws the line between language (the internal code) and usage that students must breach if they are going to meet criteria of functional proficiency. Learning the bits and pieces, even learning how they form combinations, will not help students choose the right words for the occasion. Learning to understand the language from the context and to read the context from the language will at least demonstrate what is socially appropriate.

*Communication*

Ask the students to communicate real information for a real purpose whenever possible (Scott, 1996; Swain, 1985) and avoid meaningless repetition, fill-in exercises, and the like. Obviously, the vacuous rehearsal of speech is less attractive for students than actual speaking. Speaking is not just moving sounds around, any more than playing the piano is just hitting the notes. Real communication activities require nuance and interpretation; they often have an outcome. As soon as your students are ready, have them use the language to get an answer, solve a problem, or play a game. Ask them to do that, whenever possible, in circumstances that resemble real communicative situations (Lee and VanPatten, 1995).

Many teachers like "information gap" exercises (Doughty and Pica, 1986). In this case, students work in pairs, and each is given half the information (for example, half a map, grid, or list) needed to complete a task. The pair then talk to each other until they both possess the full complement of information. It's true that, since most of your students will have the same native language (English), they won't really have to communicate with each



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other in Swahili, Dutch, or Indonesian. Therefore, the activity is still artificial. Nonetheless, it comes closer to real communication than fill-in exercises or dialogues.

*Task*

If you can, ask the students to perform tasks in and through the language instead of merely rehearsing it (Long and Crookes, 1992). A task might involve solving a word problem, creating a crossword puzzle, making a video, preparing a presentation, or drawing up a plan. Such tasks take the students' minds momentarily off form, and they will make mistakes, but they also concentrate their minds wonderfully on what they know, and need to learn, and on communicating. Tasks also hold students' interest longer than grammar exercises.

**Suggestion for Action**

Working with a partner, develop an information-gap task for students in your classes.

First, identify a context (a game? a social event? an historic event?) and create a visual aid (a map? a diagram? a web?) that the students can complete as they secure information from their partners.

What kind of time limit would you give this task?

*Collaboration*

Whenever possible, ask the students to perform tasks in pairs or small groups (Pica and Doughty, 1985); in other words, ask them to collaborate on a task. This is not the place to go into cooperative learning in any detail, but if students work together they inevitably use several types of language. They have to structure their work, as well as discussing the substance of the task and reporting the outcome. They learn from each other. Designing tasks that require collaboration is not easy. Essentially, such tasks should require a pooling of resources, they should have time limits, and they should have an outcome. Tasks that are poorly defined or open ended usually don't work; tasks that give the students 30 minutes to come up with one or two suggestions to report to the class do.

*Integration*

"Integration" refers to the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a single activity, much the way the four skills are constantly being employed among educated adults. It also refers to the integration of "content" —material in the foreign language from courses such as biology and management—into the foreign language curriculum. University students often find it instructive to read material whose content they already know. Knowledge of the topic helps in construing the text. Moreover, their primary aim in studying the language in the first place may be to read and write such material (Frantzen, 1995). Therefore, if your students are in business administration courses, make it a point to lift articles from foreign language publications devoted to market trends and the like, and



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particularly the graphs and tables that accompany them, and create tasks requiring students to summarize or evaluate their content.

*Consciousness*

Although grammar teaching is minimized in many current approaches, many approaches also minimize the needs of university students. University students often need grammar and benefit from attention to form more than purely naturalistic learners. Because of their metalinguistic awareness, university students are quicker to grasp the prescriptive rules associated with standard usage than students for whom fluency and informal communication are primary aims, and they are often more comfortable with grammar study. They may also see grammar as a shortcut to proficiency; that is, they may be able to turn rules into utterances, or to actualize the rules, more easily than the average student.

A small distinction: "attention to form" does not imply a particular approach to the teaching of grammar. Suggesting that attention to form has a role does not mean that you should take a traditional, deductive approach to grammar teaching and, for example, require students to memorize rules. Quite the opposite. As Rutherford (1987) and others suggest, you can adopt an inductive approach and insinuate grammar into the routine of a course, particularly into conferencing with students on their compositions. Sometimes, if the students know the rules, though they may not apply them consistently in production, raising their awareness is all that is needed. Asking them to think through the rules in the context of an effort to express themselves clearly has a bigger payoff than teaching the rule in isolation.

*Feedback*

While many methodologists give corrective feedback short shrift, there is evidence to support its usefulness (Lightbown, 1985, 1991; Swain, 1985). In general, feedback should take the indirect form of global responsiveness to student output. You should react to the content of student utterances whenever possible, not merely the form. Your response is a useful comprehension check for students, and on the affective level it shows that you are attending to their output.

One feedback technique for oral discourse is to paraphrase a student's utterances and in so doing, model the correct forms. Another is to ask students for clarification of their utterances—effectively, to ask them for paraphrases of their own. In providing you with paraphrases, in trying to come up with the clearest possible reformulations, they inevitably attend to issues of form. Both techniques can be adapted for conferencing around student compositions or journal entries, but be careful not to overwhelm the discourse.

As for written responses to student writing, notes in the margin requesting clarification are as effective as finely tuned feedback on grammar and mechanics, even when grammatical and mechanical criteria are applied. If you insist on a more pedantic approach, however, provide minimal clues as to error type and ask the student to come up with corrections unaided (Lalande, 1982).



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In other words, avoid feeding students the correct forms and reinforcing their dependence on you as a constant monitor. Gradually teaching them to depend less on you and more on themselves is what language teaching is all about.

**Suggestion for Action**

Working with a partner, have a conversation, preferably in a common foreign language, about family life, a recent film, or a matter of public interest.

Instead of reacting to each statement your partner makes, try reflecting it. That means summarizing it in your words, not simply repeating it. Try to do it in a relaxed, thoughtful way, not a mechanical, automatic way. Be patient.

After five minutes, ask yourself: how does it feel? Could you adapt this technique as a way of responding to your students' attempts at conversation?

*Culture*

Languages are cognitive systems, but they also express ideas and transmit cultural values (Kramsch, 1993). On the linguistic level, issues of usage can be resolved by recourse to what a native speaker would say, to a social or historical context, to cultural signifiers. The media through which culture is expressed and transmitted (e.g., popular books, newspapers, radio and television programs, films) are rich sources of information about the language and its use. On another level, they have a leavening effect on language study, and of course they offer perspective, insight, and pleasure. Few students can resist Italian movies, French comic strips, or Spanish soap operas. Nor are they immune to examples of the so-called higher culture, though the average student will not be easily seduced by Wagner, Eisenstein, or Proust. Culture in all its forms is also fun to exploit for linguistic development (Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, contains suggestions).

All things considered, the classroom's future as a setting for language learning is not as bleak as it appeared a few years ago, when it seemed a poor alternative to naturalistic acquisition. Instruction, or guided learning, has a role to play despite the battering it has received from the apostles of laissez-faire, input-is-all language instruction. Highly educated students can profit from guided work on the language even while the language is itself working on them, naturally and inexorably. In essence, all of the suggestions in this section are related. Language learning today requires active participation, much the way language teaching requires creative materials development and imaginative planning. Like materials development, language learning also requires structure, hard work, and application. Though informal acquisition during a freewheeling junior year abroad still exerts its appeal, students can get a lot of the basics out of the way before they leave.

The question is: which classroom activities are most useful for such students? Learning to create a supportive, stimulating environment and to make reasonable demands is



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not easy. Nor is learning, ultimately, to stand back and let the learner take charge. But until we know more about language, about how it is stored and how it is activated, and about foreign language development as distinct from native language acquisition, that is about as much as we can ask.

## Conclusion

As promised, this tour of the horizon has ranged far afield. As promised, it has not overreached in an attempt to be comprehensive. Instead, it has looked at only a few issues that have entered the debate on second language acquisition, and it has traced their relevance to foreign language learning. In some ways these processes are the same, and in some ways they are different.

In principle, it is a good idea to avoid the reductionism that distinguishes foreign language learning, or for that matter second language acquisition, from language acquisition in general. Although we don't know with any precision how similar these processes are, we know that children are remarkably accomplished and remarkably efficient in their language development. Whether or not the powerful cognitive advantage that children have survives childhood, many adult language learners are easily frustrated when they confront the learning of languages in a formal setting.

It is also a good idea to avoid the reductionism that says that all language learning, regardless of age, is basically the same. Adults have documented advantages that children don't enjoy. For one thing, they are experienced organizers of their learning environment, and they are good at setting goals. If it is true that the LAD atrophies with age, and that language learning partakes of general learning strategies, then adults' strategies should put them ahead of the game. They are also fully developed cognitive beings, so they can manage all the systematicity that eludes children, and they are knowers of a language in which they have achieved a degree of literacy. All of these abilities predispose them to do well in the institutional settings where formal learning takes place, as studies such as Snow and Hotnagel-Höhle (1978) suggest.

Whatever their advantages, however, the flight these learners have boarded is going to be a bumpy one. At the beginning, they will formulate assumptions about the language that seem to come out of thin air, and sometimes out of left field, though many of them are traceable to English. During the trip, they will sometimes make rapid, seemingly mysterious gains, and sometimes fall back miserably. There will be moments when the language comes together, and there will be moments when it comes apart before their very eyes. Sometimes hard work pays off, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes just letting the language sink in slowly, merely contemplating it and not attending to any aspect in particular, is the best advice. The mind needs time to sort it out and doesn't want more input. But many of your students will also find a comfortable altitude and stay there for the journey. Many will achieve only what they have to to satisfy the language requirement without destroying their



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GPA, while others will see it as a life-enhancing adventure. Whatever their attitude, or altitude, you may find a way to talk to them about it, or at least prepare them for bumpy spells and turbulence.

In any case, you have important roles to play. You are course manager, course designer, mentor, monitor, examiner, example, exemplar, and guide. The modules in this series offer numerous suggestions for you to consider in assuming these roles, for teaching all the skills and assessing student achievement. This one has offered a few modest proposals. Their essence is that, while you can't neglect accuracy, your job is to align language learning with language acquisition and the real world and to make it communicative.



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White, L. (1989). *Universal Grammar and Second Language Acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.



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## Suggested Additional Reading

Brown, H. D. (1987). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

The author presents a linguistically-based treatment of the learning and teaching of languages.

The following four works are introductory treatments of second language acquisition:

Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lightbown, P., and N. Spada. (1993). *How Languages Are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Littlewood, W. (1984). *Foreign and Second Language Learning*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: William Morrow.

### The Author

Ken Sheppard has a longstanding interest in the study of second language acquisition and the teaching of languages. He chaired the Language Forum at the City University of New York, where he taught before going to the Center for Applied Linguistics to direct a research project in content-based English as a second language. He helped to conceptualize this series of modules for the professional preparation of graduate teaching assistants and continued to contribute to their development, including a year in which he held a Fulbright research lectureship in Tunisia. Currently, he is at Educational Testing Service, where he is associate director of the program for the Test of English as a Foreign Language, with responsibility for research.



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